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Fighting for Their Lives:  
Why the Marginalized Irish from the 1840s-1910 Dominated American Prizefighting

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
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Bridgewater State University

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One of the most recognizable figures in the world during his lifetime, heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali, previously Cassius Clay and Cassius X, put his self-esteem on display with the simple declaration “I am the greatest.” This was a phrase he told himself long before he truly was the greatest, but he proved it to the world in 1964 when he defeated defending champion Sonny Liston. Upon knocking out his dangerous, violent, and cheating opponent, Ali whipped himself into a frenzy, as onlookers saw him fall over the ropes, scream at the ringside reporters who had previously doubted him, and chant “I am the greatest!” and “I’m a bad man!” as loudly as he could. In the face of overwhelming doubt, a public that did not believe in him, parents that disowned him, and a white Christian society that feared and hated him, Ali claimed one of the most important social and sporting titles in the world. To this day, boxing fans, experts, and historians have largely come to agree with him; Muhammad Ali was the greatest professional boxer that ever lived.

By normal standards of success, there ought to have been no way that Ali reached the level of fame, wealth, and talent that he did. He was a black man born in the segregated Deep South in 1942, raised by poor parents and a father that taught him to fear and distrust the white race. He did not perform well in school, had a limited knowledge of even practical applications of mathematics, vocabulary, and geography, and most likely had undiagnosed learning disabilities. He was drawn to a religion that was shunned and misunderstood by the majority of Americans at the time, including his own Christian parents. Eventually, his chosen religious group, the Nation of Islam, orchestrated the assassination of one of Ali’s best friends and greatest mentors, Malcolm X. Additionally, Ali experienced failed marriages, was spied on by the FBI, and was stripped of the titles he earned because he refused to fight in a war he did not support. Despite these profound disadvantages, Ali dominated one of the most popular sports in the

United States to amass wealth and world-wide status and inspired generations of fighters from all racial and religious backgrounds, and has countless books and films created about his life.

The most remarkable aspect of Ali's story, though, is that compared to other boxing greatest and legends, it is rather unremarkable. The greatest fighters the sport has ever seen have nearly all come from incredible disadvantage and marginalization. A list of just a few of the more recognizable names illustrates the point: Mike Tyson (1966-) was raised by a single, drug-using, prostitute mother in one of the most violent neighborhoods in the country, and was first arrested at age 13 for robbery; Joe Louis (1914-1981) was the son of impoverished sharecroppers and had to spend his entire career hiding his true thoughts and feelings so that he would be an acceptable black champion to white America; James Braddock (1905-1974) was a poor laborer supporting a family during the Great Depression before becoming heavyweight champion; Julio Cesar Chaves Sr. (1962-) grew up in an abandoned railroad car with his nine siblings, and started fighting at age 16 to earn money for the family. Poverty, discrimination, and boxing have had a unique correlated relationship in the United States since its introduction to the British colonies in the 1700s, and to this day it is incredibly rare to find a truly great boxer who has not come from a low socio-economic and/or a racial minority background.

To better understand this phenomenon in sports history, one of the best places to start is in the earliest incarnations of widespread boxing in the United States. While many Americans practiced combative sports like bareknuckle fighting and wrestling as early as the first half of the eighteenth century, boxing grew in practice and popularity after the 1840s, mainly due to the first mass immigration of impoverished Irish fleeing the destruction and poverty wrought by the Great Famine. The presence of the Irish in legal and illegal American prizefighting undoubtedly shows some of the earliest connections between marginalization and boxing success, a pattern

that was adhered to for centuries thereafter. Irish men brought with them the boxing traditions of the British Isles, and upon their settlement in American cities they and their descendants came to dominate the bareknuckle era of professional boxing in a successful effort to assert their masculinity, rise from poverty, and earn a place in the mainstream cultural majority of their new country.

The narrative of the plight of the Irish in the United States is hardly a new topic. In the journey of the Irish to earn their “whiteness,” and explain why it was not bestowed upon them initially, countless historians have analyzed the discriminations they faced in mid-to-late 1800s America. There is a rich historiography regarding Irish immigration and the changing social statuses of the Irish people, that are centered on a few key questions. One of these questions is to what extent the Irish were responsible for their own victimization and negative experiences outside of their homeland. White Englishmen and Americans during the early through mid-1800s attributed Irish hardships to attributes like laziness, gluttony, animalistic traits, and an incorrect religion. However, later scholars abandoned such stereotypes to instead focus on legitimate cultural, economic, and political reasons that the Irish themselves may have been responsible for their own strife.

One prominent work addressing this question is Kerby Miller’s 1985 book, *Emigrants and Exiles*. Miller describes his book as answering three main questions: how did the Irish view emigration from Ireland? What determined those views? To what extent did these views and attitudes shape their actual experience in North America?<sup>1</sup> In regards to the analysis of the responsibility that the Irish held for their own experiences, his third question is the most

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<sup>1</sup> Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3.

important. He joins leagues of historians who argue that the Irish saw themselves less as immigrants and more as exiles, who felt forced from their homeland and remained spiritually and emotionally connected to it, even after emigration. In this assertion, Miller aligns himself with the typical narrative of both historians and Irish immigrants. For sources, Miller identifies primary sources in the form of letters exchanged between immigrants and their loved ones still in Ireland, which expressed a longing for home and complain about discrimination and foreignness. One of the other prominent primary sources used by Miller are Irish folk songs. One of the major themes of traditional Irish music is immigration and the longing for home, as expressed in famous tunes such as “Paddy’s Green Shamrock Shore” and “The Fields of Atherny.”

While Miller uses reliable and reasonable sources, he reaches conclusions that border on cultural-wide victim blaming. Ultimately, he concludes that the roots of Irish rural culture were the cause of the suffering of the Irish in their new modernizing urban environments like Boston and New York City. He describes Irish values as communal, dependent, and static, and further identifies these values as pre-modern and conservative. Most of Ireland during the 1840s was still rural, built on the basis of large families, trusting small communities, and reliance on kin when in need. This arrangement created a safety net for Irish farmers in an occupation that was far from lucrative. Rural Irish were generally skeptical of modernization, and instead firmly rooted themselves in their traditions, faith, and rural values. While these assertions are true, Miller unnecessarily describes them as liabilities.

He describes the combination of these values as the “Irish Catholic worldview,” which he describes as an “archaic” mindset of self-pity and the rejection of modernity, rooted in a deep group-psychological rooted in centuries of being conquered by foreign powers and subject to

poverty.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the overall theme of his book is that the Irish only felt themselves as exiles, but in reality were voluntary emigrants who could have stayed in Ireland. This sentiment is true only by the dictionary definition of the word “could.” While some Irish were literally forced from Ireland in the case of political exile, most immigrants came to the United States as an escape from oppressive British legislation, racist Anglo-Saxon attitudes, and systemic poverty. While technically speaking they indeed “could” have chosen to remain in such an environment, saying that they were forced to leave is, in practice, truer than not. In this conclusion, he essentially puts an academic tone to old anti-Irish serotypes, such as stubbornness, inadaptability, and single-mindedness.<sup>3</sup>

Miller also focuses heavily on one particular group of migrants: poor, Catholic, anti-British, nationalists. Protestants living in Ireland during the famine may have had better odds of receiving aid from England, but they were certainly not immune to starvation and related diseases. Another of Miller’s points is that Ireland was naturally destined for failure based on geography and climate of the island. He writes “Ireland could not have developed into anything other than what it had become by the early twentieth century: a supplier of raw materials, chiefly pastoral products, and of emigrants to more-fortunate countries.”<sup>4</sup> This view is false and nearly racist. It was not due to natural geography, but continued oppression that the Irish economy struggled to develop. It is now known fact, for example, that the disaster wrought by the Great Famine was largely due not to the potato blight itself, but by the British confiscation of all other healthy agriculture products from Ireland to sell them abroad and keep the market strong, in

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<sup>2</sup> Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 236.

<sup>4</sup> Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 10.

addition to the damage caused by the British Poor Laws and English-run workhouses.<sup>5</sup> Other British policies, like the disenfranchisement of Catholics in the democratic process, or only granting the best land to Protestant loyalists, kept Ireland poor. Modern history has in fact proven Ireland's economic potential, namely in the economic phenomenon from the 1990s to 2008 known as the Celtic Tiger. In this short time period, Ireland became one of the fastest growing economies in the world not because its geography or climate changed, but because it was allowed to operate a free market outside of British interference.<sup>6</sup> Miller's vision of a permanently destitute Ireland due to its own nature was wrong before he wrote his book and continued to be wrong in the decades following.

However, Miller's focus on nationalist Catholics, and his overall conclusion that it was their own traditions and values that made them inclined to suffer abroad, may be attributed to the historical context surrounding his writing. For context, Miller researched and compiled his book in the 1980s and released it in 1985, during a period of Irish history known as The Troubles. Internationally, Irish Catholic nationalists continuously made headlines in the form of the Irish Republican Army, a militant terrorist group aimed at uniting Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland through the use of force. In the 1980s, the IRA was one of the most prominent terrorist groups in the West, targeting British civilians, British officials, and fellow Irish citizens with car bombs and assassinations. They were officially opposed by the Irish government, but the group was supported by radical nationalist Irish citizens and funded through donations from Irish emigrants and Irish descendants around the world. The many enemies of the IRA targeted

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<sup>5</sup> Tim Pat Coogan, *The Famine Plot: England's Role in Ireland's Greatest Tragedy*, (New York; Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 31, 117, 163.

<sup>6</sup> Donal Donovan, Antoin E. Murphy, *The Fall of the Celtic Tiger: Ireland and the Euro Debt Crisis*, (Oxford, United Kingdom; Oxford University Press, 2010), 20-24.



them with Irish stereotypes, such as having a violent inclination, and anti-Irish sentiment re-emerged in Britain. In this cultural context, affecting even academics attempting to remain objective, it seems that generalized criticisms of Irish culture tainted Miller's research. Despite his reliance on excellent sources, both primary and secondary, he used them to form a narrative that blamed the Irish for their own historical emigration struggles.

Miller's book received heavy criticism in the following years, and by 1993 was directly countered by historian Donald Akenson and his book *The Irish Diaspora*, in which he analyzed the overwhelming success of famine emigrants who settled in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and elsewhere in the English-speaking world. Akenson is a well-published historian of modern Ireland and has earned scholarly praise for his work covering modern Irish social and political history. By looking at the financial and social success of famine immigrants elsewhere in the world, Akenson argued that Irish values and traditional Irish rural culture could not have been responsible for the suffering they faced in the United States. Irish from the same counties and lifestyles that fled to the United States fled to places like colonial Australia, where they occupied 20% of New South Wales and had an evenly dispersed presence in the other five colonies, as well as making up 24% of all of Canada and 34% of Ontario by 1871.<sup>7</sup>

Akenson opens his book by critiquing the general methods and habits of scholars of Irish immigration from the past few decades. First, he praises the development of understanding multiculturalism, by saying that the best works of multiculturalism have increased tolerance and understanding between different cultures, through studying how the values of different groups combine into the agreed-upon values of diverse English-speaking populations like the United

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<sup>7</sup> Donald H. Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora*, (Belfast, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom: The Queen's University of Belfast, 1993), 6.

States and Canada. However, he believes that the process has not gone far enough.

Multicultural studies have analyzed cultures only as they exist within the geographic boundaries of the nation in question, and only studies them in relation to what is already known about the country. Akenson suggests that this is only one piece of a full study, because the groups in question need to be studied in a global context, so as to not “relegate to secondary importance anything that does not have to do with that particular modern nation.”<sup>8</sup> He compares the previous attempts at multicultural books to displaying only a piece of a Fabergé egg: beautiful on its own, but meant to be looked at in conjunction with many other pieces to become something more spectacular.

Akenson also argues that past works about Irish immigration were biased in regards to who the authors considered Irish. To a modern audience, this may seem to be a confusing proposal, as an Irish person would be someone who resided in Ireland, or had descendants from Ireland, and were part of Ireland’s cultural tradition. However, given the intense and violent divides in modern Ireland over issues like religion and political loyalties, many authors focused their studies on only one group of Irish that they considered “real” Irish. For his study, Akenson affirms that he will be looking at the Irish whether they were Catholic, Protestant, former Cromwellians, descendants of Norman settlers, or Scots-Irish. Akenson’s clear answer is that a “real” Irish person is “anyone who lived permanently within the social system that was the island of Ireland.”<sup>9</sup>

After discussion on the importance of reliable data and being skeptical of texts that use figures like “all,” “most,” and “some,” Akenson’s book adapts his aforementioned new

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<sup>8</sup> Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora*, 7.

multiculturalism and looks at Irish Famine emigrants in a global context, analyzing their relocation and different levels of success in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Great Britain, the United States, and Canada. He uses this global context to directly counter Miller's *Emigrants and Exiles*, which blamed traditional Irish values on their lack of early success in the United States. If this was the case, then the primarily rural, agrarian, and traditional Irish would have also suffered great failures in Ontario, Sydney, New South Wales, and Johannesburg. Instead, it was not the Irish values, but the values of their new homes that largely determined the degree of Irish safety and prosperity.

For example, in South Africa, even decades after the famine, the Irish arrived to a place already containing strong anti-Anglo sentiment. The First and Second Anglo-Boer Wars, the Anglo-Zulu Wars, and the continued years of the British Empire trying to force the Dutch out of South Africa left the Dutch and Boer residents unfriendly towards the English.<sup>10</sup> Those familiar with Irish history can quickly understand why the Irish would feel at home in such an environment. This more welcoming attitude opened financial opportunities that few Irish immediately achieved in Liverpool, Glasgow, New York, or Boston. Because South Africa did not have a history of anti-Irish sentiment, and the Dutch residents could relate to anti-Anglo ideas harbored by the Irish, the immigrants found greater skilled job opportunity. In South Africa, 48.7% of male migrants got jobs in commerce, finance, or professional fields, 32.1% found work in skilled trades, and a minority of only 17% went into agriculture, the background trade of most of these migrants.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora*, 128-129.

<sup>11</sup> Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora*, 124.

Akenson makes excellent use of sources to show economic opportunities for the Irish elsewhere in the world, such as the registered forms of employment in the previous South Africa example. By using not only Irish sources, like letters, songs, Irish newspapers, or diaries, but also quantifiable data from their new settlements, Akenson adds a level of diversity and data-driven evidence to his arguments. *The Irish Diaspora* is still one of the leading works of the more modern understanding of to what degree the Irish were responsible for their own turmoil, and its conclusions and methodology are still the accepted level of scholarship on the topic. However, Irish immigration historiography does not end with only the theme of self-responsibility. If, as Akenson and later scholars assert, the Irish were not to blame for their difficulties in urban America, then who was? Another thread of historiography analyses this question, and typically historians have concluded that it was Anglo-Americans' understanding of race combined with the economic status of most Irish immigrants that created discrimination against the Irish. The perceived difference between the Celtic race and the white race, which persisted through the nineteenth century, and the extremely limited capital that the Irish arrived with have been two prominent historiographical topics in the recent decades.

Irish immigrants, of course, were but one of many demographics to make the move to the United States during the nineteenth century, and understanding how their experience compared to other immigrant groups can help shed light on the success or failure of their assimilation. Historian John Bodnar's 1985 book, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* seeks to provide a generalized overview of the nineteenth-century immigrant experience. In it, Bodnar finds that economic status was the greatest challenge to not only the Irish, but most so-called "Old World" European immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He does not limit his analysis to one ethnic or cultural group, but instead focuses on

the shared experiences of immigrants in urban America, so that he can identify patterns of similarity between them. As neither the work as a whole nor a specific chapter is devoted to only the Irish experience, his thesis and analysis is a broad claim about immigrant experience as a whole. The thesis of *The Transplanted* is that “the fragile link between the generations of the last century and the current one is not necessarily cultural or emotional as much as it is the shared need to respond to an evolving capitalism.”<sup>12</sup> Here, Bodnar says that the greatest challenge to any immigrant group, including the Irish, was not their race, or their religion, or their accent, but their need to make a drastic economic shift to compete in the job market of industrialized modernity. This claim is actually similar to the argument of another 1985 work, Miller’s *Emigrants and Exile*. Unlike Miller, though, Bodnar does not place blame on immigrant culture for their difficult lives in urban United States, nor claims that there was something inherent or natural about immigrant culture that stopped them from succeeding.

Early in the book, Bodnar argues that Ireland was the most notable exception to the pattern of European emigration in the early 1800s. For most other nations that produced many emigrants, like England and Germany, emigrants were lower middle class but not destitute. The poorest members of such nations could not afford to emigrate, and it was the lower middle class, who saw their situation as inevitably worsening, that scraped together what they had in order to pursue more economic opportunity elsewhere. In Ireland, though, Bodnar points out that the opposite was true. As early as the 1830s, even before the Great Famine, it was the most destitute Irish that made the trip to the United States.<sup>13</sup> Ireland suffered nearly irreversible economic damage under oppressive British legislation. British imperial rule in Ireland meant keeping most

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<sup>12</sup> John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America*, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985), xv.

<sup>13</sup> Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 17.

farmers in tenant status, forcing Catholics off fertile land, instituting high taxes, and strictly controlling the import and export of goods. In fact, by the time of the Famine in the 1840s, Protestant landlords sometimes paid for their tenants to emigrate because a boat ticket was more cost effective than having tenant families starve and die on their land. This meant that the Irish, more than any other group of European emigrants, came to the United States in the most extremes of poverty.

This disadvantage of arriving to the United States already in the lowest economic class meant that the Irish, more than other immigrants, were more likely to take the first low-skill, low-paying jobs that were offered to them. For example, in 1850, 50% of all the Irish workers in Philadelphia were “unskilled laborers,” compared to other immigrant groups like Germans, 67% of whom were skilled artisans. In Boston, too, 65% of the Irish population worked low-skill manual labor jobs.<sup>14</sup> The Irish, like many immigrant groups, were also inclined to accept more dangerous or poorly compensated jobs. For an example of one such low-paying job, thousands of Irish women and children worked in Massachusetts textile mills from the 1830s to the end of the century. Additionally, Irish workers that went into government jobs or local politics were allowed to do so because some believed that politics was a “dishonest” field that was better suited for the Irish rather than “honest work,” and government jobs would suit them well because they were content and unambitious. Bodnar notes that, in fact, in the mid-nineteenth century in Boston, “only Irishmen were hired as firemen, since it was believed, unlike Yankees, they would not want further promotions.”<sup>15</sup> Throughout the book, Bodnar’s analysis of the nineteenth century Irish emigrants is primarily economic. *The Transplanted* is a very useful addition to the

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<sup>14</sup> Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 63.

<sup>15</sup> Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, 69-70.

historiography of Irish immigration to the U.S. because it is an example of historians who use an economic lens to best understand the life of nineteenth century immigrants. He characterizes their life as focused on economic class and struggling out of poverty in urban United States, unlike later historians who focus on ideas of race as the main obstacle to Irish success.

Due to the Irish people's early status as non-whites, it is understandable why historians have analyzed the Irish and Irish-American experience in order to understand the concept of whiteness in American history. In 1991, David Roediger released *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. In his chapter devoted to the Irish in the United States during the Antebellum period, he identifies race as the driving factor behind Irish discrimination. In a period when the Irish were not considered white, and some even questioned their biological relation to Anglo peoples, the Irish initially received similar economic and social opportunity to emancipated African Americans. He boldly opens the chapter by citing nativist accounts that claim "to be called an Irishman had come to be nearly as great an insult as to be called a nigger," at least in antebellum Philadelphia. Roediger continues to reveal the assumed connection between Irish and African Americans by saying that there were suggestions that the Celts were "a separate caste or 'dark' race, possibly originally African."<sup>16</sup> However, he does not cite either of these claims further than the vague terminology of "one account" and "some suggested," respectively.

Throughout the chapter, Roediger attempts to prove that it was the race of the Irish—their lack of whiteness during the antebellum years—that earned them disdain from nativist Anglo-Americans. In this attempt, he has moments of both success and failure, largely due to the

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<sup>16</sup> David R. Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (London, United Kingdom: Verso Books, 1991), 133.

sources he uses. One of his successes is drawing comparison between African American and Irish communities, both in ways of life and in the treatment they received from white Americans. In his comparison, he correctly asserts that the dominate Anglo-Saxon community forced both groups into the slums of urban America, both were primarily poor and “vilified,” and that the sense of longing for home and the search for a feeling of belonging and acceptance characterized both groups.<sup>17</sup> From the late 1820s to the early 1830s, before the arrival of Famine emigrants, the Irish seemed to have accepted their non-white status and lived alongside African Americans, as both groups were the victims of race riots in Boston in 1829. There was also limited Irish participation in the anti-abolition riots of the following year. In fact, Roediger points out that in 1834, a series of anti-black and anti-abolition riots in New York were put down by Irish militias.<sup>18</sup>

By the age of Famine emigration and through the end of the American Civil War and Reconstruction, however, Roediger argues that the Irish asserted their whiteness by distancing themselves from African Americans and denying racial similarity. One way Roediger argues this was done was by distancing themselves from radical Irish politician Daniel O’Connell, the man responsible for the famous Catholic Emancipation in Ireland—earning Catholics the right to vote—and nicknamed “The Liberator.” In addition to his views on equality between Catholics and Protestants, he was also a staunch abolitionist and admirer of men like Frederick Douglas and William Lloyd Garrison.<sup>19</sup> In response to O’Connell’s call for abolition, Irish-Americans in New York publicly “answered his call with a sharp denial that Blacks were brethren of Irish-

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<sup>17</sup> Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 134.

<sup>18</sup> Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 134.

<sup>19</sup> Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 135-6.



Americans.”<sup>20</sup> By the 1850s, the Irish had become increasingly considered white by Anglo-Americans primarily through anti-black sentiment, participation in Catholic churches in the United States, and, most importantly to Roediger, affiliation with the Democratic Party. Because large numbers of the Irish would continuously vote against emancipation or other liberal ideas, Democrats, especially in the South, became more willing to accept the Irish as equals and earn their votes. In the context of the slavery debate and the Mexican-American War, the Irish were more visibly white than ever, and the superiority of the “Anglo-Saxon-American” race came to include members of the Celtic race. Powerful politicians recognized the potential for the Irish vote, and President Buchanan himself considered true Americans to be “a mixed population of English, Scotch-Irish, French, Welsh, German, and Irish ancestry.”<sup>21</sup>

Roediger very clearly places himself amongst historians who find whiteness or ideas of race to be the most important aspect of Irish discrimination in the United States, though some of the sources he uses are of questionable quality. For example, many of his bold opening statements come from unnamed sources, which he merely describes as “one source” or “some accounts,” or other vague terms. His named primary sources—quotes from leading politicians, ministers, journalists, and other community leader—are reliable, but his attention-getting claims seem to be just that. Regardless of the source quality, Roediger is an excellent historiographical example of the larger discussion about what aspect of Irishness created the most adversity in their new American lives.

The historiography of Irish immigration to the United States is extensive, but focuses specifically on a few major themes; self-responsibility versus circumstances, economic and

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<sup>20</sup>Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 136.

<sup>21</sup> Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 141.

social discriminations, and the development and fluidity of race. Few have fully embraced sports history as a lens into Irish-American culture. Sports historians have made the direct connection between boxing and racial empowerment. This historiography is rich, and has so far primarily focused on the relationship between boxing and the African American and Hispanic communities, but such authors have reached conclusions that are helpful for the examination of nineteenth-century Irish and Irish-American boxers. Again, studying the pattern of boxing champions reveals that each era of boxing greats has produced champions and community leaders from the largest discriminated-against minority at the time, and there is a variety of historical works that show this clear connection.

In 1983, Dominic Capeci and Martha Wilkerson published an essay entitled "Multifarious Hero: Joe Louis, American Society and Race Relations During World Crisis" in the *Journal of Sport History*. Capeci and Wilkerson use heavyweight champion Joe Louis to examine what they believe is an under-utilized tool for studying race relations during 1930s and 1940s: the hero. They find that while countless works have been written on world leaders, policy changes, and economics, there has been little research done into the role of important cultural figures and heroic personalities that inspired people of their time in regard to views on race. Their thesis is that "more than any other hero, heavyweight boxer Joe Louis loomed large from 1934 to 1945, a time when Afro-Americans encountered severe hardship, challenged racial mores, and laid foundations for future advances. Amidst both the hostile racism and reform spirit of the Great Depression, he exemplified black perseverance."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Dominic J. Capeci and Martha Wilkerson, "Multifarious Hero: Joe Louis, American Society and Race Relations During World Crisis, 1935-1945," *Journal of Sport History* 10, no. 3 (1983), 5.

Capeci's and Wilkerson's sources include Louis' autobiography, contemporary poetry from black writers like Langston Hughes, comments from Louis' celebrity friends like Ed Sullivan, newspaper accounts of his fights, and even comments from President Franklin D. Roosevelt. For secondary sources, the authors cite numerous works of sports history and Louis biographies, including work from familiar names like historian Randy Roberts. The authors use the sources to show the growth and change of Louis from a naïve, youthful brawler with dreams of money and fame to a heroic champion with an understanding of his importance to those of African descent all over the world.

The authors quickly establish the important connection between boxing and race relations during Louis' time. Before Louis, the public's idea of a black heavyweight champion was Jack Johnson. Johnson empowered himself by ignoring what white Americans wanted him to do and by living as freely as he could. He defied social norms, was not religious, pursued romance with several white women, and proudly put his wealth on display with fancy clothes, jewelry, and cars. Louis, at least in the public eye, followed his mother's advice: "trust in God, work hard, and hope for the best."<sup>23</sup> Louis' entire team of trainers, managers, and spokespeople worked carefully create a respectable image of Louis for not just black Americans, but all Americans, an endeavor that was never pursued by Johnson.

The authors consider the height of this all-Americans representation to be his championship fight with Nazi supporter and the supposed pinnacle of Aryan superiority Max Schmeling in 1938. After a personal meeting with President Roosevelt, during which the president impressed upon Louis the international importance of the fight, in the context of

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<sup>23</sup>Capeci and Wilkerson, "Multifarious Hero: Joe Louis, American Society and Race Relations During World Crisis, 1935-1945," 6.

democracy prevailing against Nazism, Louis demolished Schmeling in the first round.<sup>24</sup> In this event, the authors see the beginnings of mass support for Louis by black and white Americans alike. Despite a few years of on-and-off criticism from the public, Louis remained extremely popular. His popularity only increased when he enlisted in the army during World War II, passing his army physical a few days after yet another title defense against white contender Jacob “Buddy” Baer, and from 1942 to 1945 was a patriotic hero who was seen as giving up his riches and career to serve in a segregated military unit in the name of patriotism.

Overall, this 1983 essay is an excellent addition to boxing historiography and sports literature. It makes the explicit and deep connection between the importance of boxing to both the American public and as a tool to create positive images for race relations. The authors use a healthy variety of primary sources from multiple angles, and do a fine job analyzing the biases of each source to construct as truthful a narrative as possible. It fits well into the pattern of the broader context of the importance of race in boxing history, and matches the tone of other post-1980 works of sports history.

Only two years later, in 1985, renowned boxing and gender historian Elliot J. Gorn published “Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch”: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” in *The American Historical Review*. In this essay, Gorn, author of other staple works of boxing literature like *Manliness in the Squared Circle* and *The Manly Art*, analyzes the connection between boxing and social class, as well as the connection between boxing and geography. He studies these connections by analyzing fighting methods in the rural South in pre-Revolutionary War America. In a later work, sports historian Gerald R. Gems

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<sup>24</sup> Capeci and Wilkerson. “Multifarious Hero: Joe Louis, American Society and Race Relations During World Crisis, 1935-1945,” 10.

simplified this methodology as “determining who boxed, when and why they boxed, and what the results were (factual, cultural, medical, and moral.)”<sup>25</sup> In the southern backcountry and wild Appalachia, farmers, blacksmiths, river-boat men, gamblers, and all manner of laborers competed in one of boxing’s more notorious forms. It has many names, including “brawling,” “gouging,” and “rough and tumble,” but they all mean the same thing: a fight that only adheres to rules the competitors agreed upon, with potentially life-or-death consequences. In this essay, Gorn looks not at a singular ethnic group in boxing, but the class-culture that is drawn to boxing, and how geography determines the importance of fighting to a community. Gorn’s thesis is that how any group of people fought is a useful indicator of larger social, economic, or political issues of the time and place, saying that “although historians are more likely to study people thinking, governing, worshiping, or working, how men fight—who participates, who observes, which rules are followed, what is at stake, what tactics are allowed—reveals much about past societies and cultures.”<sup>26</sup> This methodology of history is true in folk, social, and military history, where types of fighting and battle tactics can be revealing of larger aspects of culture. Gorn uses southern backcountry fighting rules to try to understand the larger context of pre-Revolution southern culture.

Gorn’s thesis fits very well within the larger context of the essay. He studies the peoples of the generic “Southern backcountry,” but more specifically focuses on Virginia, the Carolinas, and Kentucky as places of high interest for his study. Throughout the book he focuses on white,

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<sup>25</sup>Gerald R. Gems, *Boxing: A Concise History of the Sweet Science* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2014), xiii.

<sup>26</sup> Elliot J. Gorn, “Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch”: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” *The American Historical Review*, 90, no. 1 (February 1985): 18.

lower-class men, ethnically Scots-Irish and French, narrowing his study as much as possible, and tries to use evidence from fighting styles and fight outcomes to reach conclusions about his subjects. He uses cornerstones of southern culture, such as folk stories, oral tradition, hospitality customs, kin loyalty, and agrarian lifestyles to show how each relates to the style of boxing that was common in the region. Even though competitors mauled each other to the point of permanent crippling, Gorn explains that it was rarely out of hate, and more about preserving honor and social status. In a world of increasing modernization, poor white Southerners began to feel that they were becoming obsolete in comparison to wealthy plantation farmers and centers of power residing in the urban North. In response, they dug deeply into their ways and customs of social structure to preserve their way of life. Gorn concludes; “On the margins of a booming, modernizing society, they shared an intensely communal yet fiercely competitive way of life. Thus, where work was least rationalized and specialized, domesticity weakest, legal institutions primitive, and the market economy feeble, rough-and-tumble fighting found fertile soil.”<sup>27</sup> Here, Gorn draws his analysis of regional cultural values from fighting style. Rough-and-tumble fighting was bloody, sometimes cruel, and a matter of honor; a perfect combination for the lawless setting of the undeveloped and sparsely populated South.

Methodologically, Gorn looks at folk history to reveal answers from this reclusive and communal society, drawing evidence from oral traditions and, more reliably, accounts of travelers from elsewhere in the colonies as well as other countries. These two sources show polar opposite opinions of both the activity itself and the competitors. From travelers, there was an attitude of disapproval, disgust, contempt, confusion, fear, and judgement. Gorn quotes preachers, tutors, government bodies, and merchants, from recordings in private journals or the

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<sup>27</sup> Gorn, “Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch,” 35-36.

passing of (ineffective) laws prohibiting the sport. These sources describe the contests as animalistic, primitive, and sinful, and associate it explicitly with poverty, laborers, and Scots-Irish descendants. In opposition, he cites folk stories of regional champions, boasts, folk customs, poems, and songs that celebrate the gouging way of life, maimed opponents, and showing off battle scars like missing eyes or bitten-off noses. Gorn's work is an excellent addition to boxing literature and a useful insight into a reclusive world. Some of the most exciting, nostalgic, and formative years of boxing were times of unregulated bareknuckle fights, a difficult topic to research due to its folk culture nature, and Gorn provides access to the lives of these rural American pugilists.

After the 1980s, there was a slowing of boxing literature for over a decade. It seemed that the publications of Gorn and a select few other historians would be the definitive works of boxing history. While these works still are essentials to the collection of literature, an interest in boxing history resurfaced in the 2000s and a stream of films, documentaries, essays, and books were published, nearly all of them analyzed boxing as a social phenomenon with deep, inherent connection to class, race, and discrimination. One work that helped push boxing history back into the academic spotlight was a documentary by the popular filmmaker Ken Burns, entitled *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. While Burns is not a historian, his documentary is worthy of analysis and inclusion in this study because of its success with audiences and spurring of a new cultural interest in boxing, making later publications possible. A conveniently recent piece of evidence to support this inclusion is that President Donald Trump issued a posthumous pardon to Johnson on May 24, 2018, clearing his name from fabricated charges and conviction by a white jury in order to stop his financial and cultural success.

It is difficult to pull out a single sentence that would suffice as the thesis for this lengthy and detailed documentary, but the documentary could be described as a portrayal of Jack Johnson as the embodiment of black freedom in a time when African Americans were neither enslaved nor fully free. The documentary describes Johnson's station in the public eye as one of threatening the social order, explaining that "to most whites, and to some African Americans, Johnson was a perpetual threat, profligate, arrogant, immoral, a dark menace, and a danger to the natural order of things."<sup>28</sup> The casual translation of this sentiment is that Johnson was a free man who lived as he pleased, pursued what he wished, and resisted oppression that was derived from his skin color. Ken Burns spends the entirety of the film showing that boxing was not only Johnson's occupation, but his means to pursue freedom, gain status, inspire an entire race of Americans, and literally confront white oppressors face-to-face.

Burns boldly calls Johnson one of the two most important black leaders in the United States by the time Johnson was the heavyweight champion in 1908, the other being W.E.B. du Bois. Using Johnson's personal writings, as well as heavily biased newspaper publications about him, Burns finds that Johnson offered an option for blacks seeking elevated status that differed from du Bois' theory. Du Bois believed in collective, group efforts to achieve black elevation, such as the "double consciousness" movement (called "black consciousness" in places like South Africa) and the Pan-African movement. Johnson, according to Burns' portrayal, felt that simply being born earned him, and everyone else, status equal to whites, and it was up to individuals to prove themselves and assert their own freedom. Through his fame and nearly unprecedented wealth, he chose to visibly live in a way only white men were supposed to live. He wore elegant

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<sup>28</sup> *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*. Directed by Ken Burns. Arlington, VA: Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), 2004.



suits, purchased and drove the newest and fastest cars, dated and slept with almost exclusively white women, and, most importantly, won and defended the heavyweight championship against every so-called ‘Great White Hope’ that entered the ring with him.

Burns’ methodology includes the analysis of primary sources like sports journalism, non-sports journalism, Johnson’s personal writings and reflections, the writings of his white opponents, writings of Johnson’s trainers and managers, opinion pieces by famous writers like Jack London, and original films of Johnson’s fights. His secondary sources are interviews with biographers of Johnson, modern boxing reporters, retired boxing greats, and, as most documentaries include, unprofessional but informed recognizable figures who have subject knowledge, such as actor James Earl Jones. With the exception of celebrity opinions, which cannot qualify as a valid secondary source despite how well-informed, Burns makes excellent use of relevant scholarly sources to form an image of Johnson as free, defiant, and, to most white Americans, “unforgivably black.”

Ten years later, respected sports historian Gerald R. Gems added an excellent analysis of boxing history to his list of publications in 2014, with his book *Boxing: A Concise History of the Sweet Science*. Gems looks back at the history of prizefighting in all its incarnations, from its role in ancient Greek Olympics to its far more regulated professional atmosphere of modern day. In his text, Gems joins the ranks of sociologists, anthropologists, and historians who work to “determine who boxed, when and why the boxed, and what the results were (factual, cultural, medical, and moral.)”<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, Gem claims that through his plentiful case studies and tracing of the sport’s legal and social development, he transforms the misguided view that

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<sup>29</sup> Gerald R. Gems, *Boxing: A Concise History of the Sweet Science* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2014), xiii.

boxing is a blood sport for the simple and barbarous. By the end of the book, he successfully does so. He concludes the introduction by writing that “while many see boxing as a primal activity, a residual sport at odds with the civilizing process, I hope this work will provide reasons for its cultural relevance.”<sup>30</sup>

Such a broad thesis demands broad research, and Gems provides it. The work is largely correctionist, taking aim at popular stereotypes about fighting created by both the general populace and academics. Rather than focus on the violence inherent in the sport, Gems analyzes its cultural importance to different groups throughout history, in primarily the British Isles and the United States. Working thematically and chronologically, Gems utilizes methods of sports history, social history, and gender history to complete his analysis. These methods include reliance on public sports reporting, private writings, pieces of legislation regarding pugilism, etc. One of the more unique studies in the book is Gems’ chapter on gender, in which he describes the role of boxing in the context of Western masculinity, including the seemingly “homoerotic” descriptions of boxers recorded in sports journalism.

Most relevant to this project on boxing and ethnicity, Gems dedicates chapters to the tracing of boxing greats aligned with rising demographics of minorities in the United States. He agrees with historian Steven Riess<sup>31</sup> that “it is possible to trace the social mobility of ethnic groups in the United States through boxing.”<sup>32</sup> Gems and Riess are just two historians that agree on such a process, focusing on the decades in which boxing was dominated by Irish, then Jewish, then Italian, then African American, then Hispanic competitors, with each controlling the

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<sup>30</sup> Gems, *Boxing: A Concise History of the Sweet Science*, xiv.

<sup>31</sup> Steven Riess is the author of works such as *Sport in Industrial America: 1850-1920* and *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports*. He is also the editor of *Major Problems in American Sports History*.

<sup>32</sup> Gems, *Boxing: A Concise History of the Sweet Science*, 139.

championship titles of the sport in that order. Other historians could simply break the pattern down to white champions finally breaking the “color line” and being defeated by boxers of color, but a closer analysis shows that there are more complexities than a white/non-white divide.

For sports history sources, Gems goes to the expected outlets. For round-by-round accounts of fights, and the different perspectives of the details of the encounter, Gems relies on contemporary sports journalism, private correspondence, televised or otherwise recorded interviews with fighters, and (for accounts during the illegal incarnations of the sport) police reports. To cover social history, Gems looks to the words of important social and political leaders who had either a personal interest in the sport or had their social sphere affected by it. Gems shows examples of the writings of men such as Lord Byron, Ernest Hemingway, and Theodore Roosevelt to reveal how boxing permeated the lives of not just lower-class brawlers and thugs, but those of artists, politicians, and social figureheads. Gems’ covering of gender history looks to folk sources, like stories of neighborhood boxing heroes, or incredible feats of masculinity attributed to legendary brawlers like John L. Sullivan, as well as sports reporting that took pride in explicit reports of fighters’ physical conditions, describing their body, muscles, skin tone, overall health, and even how attractive they were. Gems’ research provides an excellent addition to scholarly literature about boxing, consistently demonstrating that boxing was a social and cultural phenomenon with far-reaching consequences, not just a sport of debauchery tucked away in barroom basements and offshore barges.

The much-anticipated publishing of *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship Between Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali*, cowritten by historians Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith, occurred in 2016. Of the two, Roberts is the more recognizable name to sports historians, having written dozens of sports history books, including biographies and analytical works on Joe Louis,

Jack Johnson, Mike Tyson, and Jack Dempsey, as well as American history books and high school textbooks. Continuing with the theme, this book analyzes the role of boxing in the African American experience (and minorities in general,) as well as the political and cultural importance of boxing during its more popular years. Roberts and Smith ask a few essential questions; how did Cassius Clay become Muhammad Ali? How did Muhammad Ali go from boastful boxer to a public pillar of the Nation of Islam? And how is his story reflective of black America throughout the 1960s into the 1970s? The short answer to all these questions revolves around Nation of Islam leader and African American civil rights activist Malcolm X. According to Roberts and Smith, it was the magnetic charisma of both these iconic leaders that drew them together into a personal friendship that quickly became larger than their individual lives, drastically changing the social and political circles around both of them.

Under Malcolm's guidance, Cassius Clay renounced Christianity and changed his name to Muhammad Ali, and was practically inseparable from his mentor. As a teenager and into his early 20s, Ali traveled across the country to hear Malcolm speak, to pray at Nation of Islam mosques, and to do all he could to make Malcolm proud. By the end of Malcolm's life in 1965, it was he who was chasing after Ali, trying to keep alive the one friend he had left inside the Nation of Islam, which had since shunned and disgraced him. Their shifting power dynamic and changing views on race, religion, and the role of violence in securing rights for black Americans ended when Malcolm was killed by the NOI and Ali was left with apologies, warnings, and guilt that he would never be able to communicate to his former friend.

Roberts and Smith focus heavily on the fields of sports history when covering the growth of Ali as an athlete, and political history when covering Malcolm's role in the NOI, American politics, and his influence of Ali. Methodologically, the chapters dedicated to Ali's athletic life

are standard sports history accounts. The historians discuss his fights round by round and use the sports reporting of the time as their key source, as well as pre and post-fight interviews and public comments made by Ali and his opponents. In these chapters, the historians typically described Ali more as an athlete and as a figure of pop culture than a political or social leader. The authors establish his role in boxing history using Ali's own estimated, those of journalists who covered him devoutly, and those of his close friends, trainers, and coaches. The book takes the side of Ali's famous self-description, "I am the greatest!", and further cements his legacy as the greatest boxer in the history of the sport, pound-for-pound or otherwise. In itself, this is not a revolutionary angle, as biographers and historians of Ali usually either agree with him fully or dismiss him as a clowning charlatan who had only some level of skill, though the latter became far less common as Ali retired and aged. Since Ali's recent death, the overwhelming historical opinion is that he was both the greatest boxer the sport has known and a remarkably complex and self-contradicting political and cultural figure.

The political history that Roberts and Smith cover is more interesting and nuanced. They analyze Malcolm's journey from unwavering devotee of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation to a man dedicated to undermining the Nation's corrupt leadership. The authors, like others before them, attribute the change to Malcolm's *haj*, probably the most important series of events in his life. Roberts and Smith use excellent primary sources when analyzing Malcolm's personal friendship with Ali, including phone recordings from tapped wires by the FBI, written correspondence between Malcolm and Ali, and interviews both men gave to journalists.

In regards to the research's contribution to the field of sports history—boxing history, more specifically—the book addresses the severe effects that socio-political happenings can have on an athlete's public and private life, including their abilities as a fighter. It is unlikely that Ali

would have had the same determination, charisma, strength, social backing, in-ring ruthlessness, and media coverage that he did if he were not a black man in the 1960s. His determination to win was driven by not only his skill, but his sense that his victories were part of God's will and his role in the world as a Black Muslim, ideas shaped by his private associations outside of the ring that were only possible by being a successful black athlete in a time of intense racial discrimination.

The final addition to this historiography is another 2016 work; an essay by Brian Bunk in *The Journal of American Ethnic History* called "Boxer in New York: Spaniards, Puerto Ricans, and attempts to Construct a Hispano Race." Bunk analyzes the career of lesser-known Spanish heavyweight Paulino Uzcudun, and his role in the ethnic unification of all Spanish-speakers in the United States as one cultural identity. In his article, Bunk analyzes an exception to the traditional pattern of ethnic control of boxing championships. Looking at the creation of a more unified Hispanic race in America in the 1920s, he claims that part of the unification of Spanish-speakers into one cultural group was in large part through the support of heavyweight champion Paulino Uzcudun. According to traditional historiography, the 1920s were the final years of Irish ring dominance before the transition to the age of great Jewish boxers, with Hispanic/Latino fighters not taking over the ring until the 1990s. While Bunk's case study of Uzcudun does not reflect this trajectory of ring dominance, as Spanish speakers held very few titles in the 1920s, it does reflect a common theme of boxing history: the elevation of an ethnic champion for group unification and empowerment.

Bunk's overall analysis has both strengths and weaknesses. He successfully conveys the notion that Spanish speakers in the United States searched for a variety of ways to unify their cultural/linguistic group. He cites the creation of inclusive Spanish societies, magazine coverage

of Spanish-American events, the influence of Spanish fashion on New York elites, and other examples that support his claim of attempts at unification. However, his thesis is that there was a direct link between the success of Uzcudun and this Spanish unification, with incredibly bold claims, such as that “Paulino emerged as the embodiment of the inclusionary notion that a set of underlying qualities linked all Spanish-speakers and served as a foundation for other identities.”<sup>33</sup> In such claims, it seems that Bunk may be mistaking correlation for causation. During Uzcudun’s most popular years, he was primarily famous within Spanish communities, but not in overall American sport audiences.

Uzcudun was one of the very few successful Spanish fighters of his time and was severely outnumbered by successful Irish, Anglo-American, and Jewish fighters. Additionally, his title was that of European heavyweight champion, while other dominant groups, like the Irish and Jews, earned and defended American titles for American audiences. He may have been a source of pride for the Spanish unification movement, but his importance seems to have been exaggerated for the political and social benefit of Spanish communities, and it was more of a coincidence that his success occurred simultaneously with Spanish-American unification. Furthermore, Bunk himself concludes that divides between Iberian Spanish speakers and Central American Latinos were too deep to create the a singular Hispanic ethnic identity, so his study of Uzcudun does not really highlight a figure that expedited such a process, but rather shows one of the many coincidental factors related to unification in the time period.

For sources, Bunk uses primarily Spanish magazines, editorials, newspapers, and tabloids. Additionally, he draws from personal letters written by members of Hispanic societies,

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<sup>33</sup>Brain D. Bunk, “Boxer in New York: Spaniards, Puerto Ricans, and Attempts to Construct a Hispano Race,” *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 35, no. 4 (Summer 2016):, 40.

friends of Uzcudun, and leaders of the race-creation project. His choice of sources is diverse and fruitful, and he makes use of reliable secondary sources to set a broader context, but his connection between Uzcudun and the creation of a unified ethnic identity among Spanish speakers seems contrived. Additionally, for emphasis, Uzcudun was an excellent fighter, and probably the greatest boxer ever to come from Spain, but his reign as a champion was an abnormality, and not a reflection of broader trends in ethnic history within boxing. He is a good example of the few exceptions to the traditional pattern of minority fighters, despite being overshadowed by more popular names to American audiences.

Having established the relevant historiography of both Irish immigration and boxing history, the two can now be combined into an analysis of the pivotal role of Irish pugilists in the formation of the sport. In order to prove that the Irish were the first group to establish the longstanding pattern of ethnic minorities and low economic class members being not only drawn to boxing, but extremely successful at it, there must first be proof that the Irish in the United States were indeed a marginalized group. Primary and secondary sources alike yield bountiful evidence that the Irish faced severe discrimination in the United States during their dominance of professional prizefighting (1830s-1910,) and that it was this discrimination that forced them into the violent and often illegal profession of fighting, where they earned a place in mainstream majority society through fame and wealth.

It is important to note that it is unfair to generalize an entire population of people. While an analysis of a group as a whole, in this case the Irish, requires generalizing statements, there is evidence that immigrants fleeing the famine experienced a wide range of life styles in the United States and elsewhere. The majority experienced poverty and discrimination, but it is unrealistic to assume every Irish person fleeing the Great Hunger suffered in their new countries.



The vast majority of Irish-Americans, however, faced notorious negative stereotyping, poor living conditions, low wages, high crime rates, and life in urban slums. The first challenge of the Irish in the United States was adapting to the urban societies they were essentially forced into. Ireland was a largely rural society, and while there were certainly well-populated cities like Dublin and Belfast, it was still an agricultural society and economy. Historian Malcolm Campbell notes that arriving in the United States, the Irish faced the realities of urban life, the reasons being that “pattern of urban concentration was attributable partly to a lack of capital at the time of arrival and because farming in the United States was different--there was less conviviality about rural life in the American prairies.”<sup>34</sup> This two-fold challenge—lack of capital upon time of immigration and less opportunity in the agrarian sector—were some of the most common obstacles for Irish settlement, and were strong contributors to their residence in cities.

Traditional scholarship on the Irish in urban America has been remarkably grim, such as Oscar Handlin writing in his 1941 book *Boston's Immigrants*: “one in a hundred may live and prosper, and stand to be looked at as a living monument of prosperity, but ninety-nine in a hundred are lost, never to be heard of.”<sup>35</sup> Such a claim was probably exaggerated, but was thematically correct. The urban Irish-Americans lived in poverty and were either hated or ignored by native-born Americans, who largely believed hurtful and racist rumors and stereotypes about the newcomers. Aside from the challenges of adapting to urban life in the United States, racial discrimination seemed to be a daily occurrence for many new immigrants. Acts of discrimination, as well as life in poverty, affected the entire group psychology of Irish

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<sup>34</sup>Malcolm Campbell, “The other Immigrants: Comparing the Irish in Australia and the United States.”, *Journal of American Ethnic History* 14, no. 3. (Spring, 1995), 14

<sup>35</sup>Oscar, Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants: 1790-1880, A Study in Acculturation*, (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press), 1941, 87.

Americans, creating, in Campbell's words, a "deep-seated mentality...among the Irish--all Irish, but especially Catholic Irish--which compelled them to view emigration as exile."<sup>36</sup> Once again, the motif of feelings of exile, identified by Kerby Miller in 1985, remains an essential piece of scholarship within Irish immigration history.

One of the most famous traditions in Ireland is that of music, as Irish folk songs can be found in Irish communities and communities of Irish descendants across the world. There are entire categories of these songs that exemplify unwilling emigration. The motif of "the exile" is a common thread in Irish folk music, and lyrics from popular songs ranging from the early 1800s to the 1990s display Irish cultural views on emigration. For example, one of the most famous Irish folk songs of all time is "The Rocky Road to Dublin," written sometime in the mid-1800s by an unknown author, but recorded and preformed in countless varieties since then.

The song tells the story of a young man leaving his rural town of Tuam, Ireland to travel to Liverpool, England—a common destination for Irish emigrants who could not afford trans-Atlantic passage—only to be met with discrimination and the desire for home. First, he is robbed of his few belongings: "Well then I took a stroll, All among the quality/ Bundle it was stole, All in the neat locality/ Something crossed my mind - When I looked behind, No bundle could I find, Upon me stick a wobblin'." After his robbery, he seeks passage across the English Channel and is forced to stay below-deck with livestock: "Landed on the quay, Just as the ship was sailin'/ The captain at me roared, Said that no room had he,/ When I jumped aboard, A cabin found for Paddy,/ Down among the pigs, played some funny rigs,/ Danced some hearty jigs, The water round me bubblin',/ When off Holyhead, Wished meself was dead." Finally, upon arrival

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<sup>36</sup>Malcolm Campbell, "The other immigrants: Comparing the Irish in Australia and the United States.", *Journal of American Ethnic History* 14, no. 3. (Spring 1995), 16.

in Liverpool, he is assaulted by a group of anti-Irish locals and fights them with the help of other Irish immigrants: “The boys of Liverpool, When we safely landed/ Called meself a fool; I could no longer stand it;/ Blood began to boil, Temper I was losin’;/ Poor ould Erin’s isle, They began abusin’;/ ‘Hurrah my soul,’ says I, My shillelagh I let fly;/ Galway boys were nigh, An’ saw I was a hobbling;/ With a loud hurray, They joined in the affray.”<sup>37</sup> This song provides an excellent example of the types of experiences Irish emigrants could face, and while it is not known if it is based on the story of the author, another person, or if it is a fully fictitious account, it thematically matches the known experiences of thousands of immigrants.

There was another experience of famine immigrants in the United States, one of acculturated success and even financial prosperity. Despite the obvious hardships of famine immigrants, their level of success must be judged comparatively to their previous experiences in rural Ireland. Within their letters to their friends and family back home, Irish immigrants told of access to “luxuries” such as pork, beef, and butter weekly or daily and often discussed that they managed to not only earn some money, but put some aside and build a savings account.<sup>38</sup> Because they lived in the poorest, most cramped, and often dilapidated apartments in cities like New York, their cost of living in some neighborhoods, like the notorious Five Points neighborhood, was low enough so that even though most immigrants earned low wages working manual or otherwise “unskilled” labor, it was enough to keep them housed, fed, and financially more secure than imagined possible in Ireland.<sup>39</sup> This level of success is absolutely key to the Irish experience in the United States, especially when comparing it to those who immigrated to

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<sup>37</sup> The High Kings, “Rocky Road to Dublin,” *The High Kings*, 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Tyler Anbinder, “Moving beyond ‘Rags to Riches’: New York’s Irish Famine Immigrants and Their Surprising Savings Accounts.”, *Journal of American History* 99, no. 3. (December 2012), 750.

<sup>39</sup> Anbinder, “Moving Beyond ‘Rags to Riches’”, 744.

England or Scotland, where they lived only marginally better-off than in rural Ireland and were often deported due to the strict British Poor Laws. Despite poverty and intense discrimination, life in Ireland was so much objectively worse than that in urban America, that these immigrants considered a desirable and even generous destination to which to flee from the destruction caused by the Great Famine.

These examples of financial security, though, are only successful when compared to the alternative of starving to death in Ireland. The anti-Irish sentiment in the United States, as the historiography explains, was fervent. Much of the thinking that influenced Anglo-Americans in the later 1800s came from pseudo-sciences like phrenology, racist and imperial anthropology, and warped accounts of history that were produced by supposed academics in Britain.

Discrimination against the Irish had a long and strong history in England, where racism was systemic and even rendered into a science. For example, phrenology, the false science of using skull shape to determine mental capacity, assumed the Irish to be the “missing link” between apes and humans. This crude and base concept prompted notable Victorian author Charles Kingsley to write “I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw [in Ireland] . . . I don't believe they are our fault. . . . But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much. . . .”<sup>40</sup> Many prominent British thinkers, writers, and scientists considered the Irish closer to apes and Cro-Magnon man than to Anglo-Saxons. In 1885, John Beddoe, president of the British Anthropological Institute from 1889 to 1891, wrote in *Races of Britain* that “all men of genius were orthognathous while the Irish and the Welsh were prognathous and

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<sup>40</sup>“Charles Kingsley in a letter to his wife, 1847,” as quoted in L.P. Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England* (Bridgeport, CT; University of Bridgeport Press, 1968), 48.

the Celt was closely related to Cro-Magnon man, who, in turn, is linked to the Africanoid.”<sup>41</sup>

This primary account from Beddoe echoes the claims of Donald Akenson, who argued that popular sentiment in the Anglo-American world was to compare the lifestyles and genetics of African-Americans and Irish-Americans.

Aside from pseudo-scientific and social aspects of life in the United States that made the Irish a marginalized group, there was also a political level to discrimination. In the Antebellum period, one popular political organization that succeeded in local and state governments, but not the national government, was the American Party. The American Party, also commonly known as the Know-Nothing Party or the Know-Nothings, used nativism as the basis of the party’s platform. Know-Nothings were native-born, white, Anglo-descended Americans who strongly opposed immigration, the abolition movement, the anti-slavery movement, racial equality, and Catholicism. Their combined ideas of white Anglo-Protestant supremacy, unsurprisingly, resulted in a fervent hatred of Irish Catholic immigrants.<sup>42</sup> In April of 1854, *The Daily Dispatch*, published a critique piece on the politics of the American Party and defended Irish-Americans who felt threatened by nativist sentiment.

This publication, among others, shows not only that the Know-Nothings were a significant enough group to earn journalistic response, but also that there were Americans who did not share their beliefs. The article begins by describing the American Party as orchestrating “attacks on the Irish population of that city,” (the city being New York City), “with a degree of

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<sup>41</sup>John, Beddoe, *Races of Britain: A Contribution to the Anthropology of Western Europe*, (London, England, UK), 1885.

<sup>42</sup> Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s*, (Oxford, United Kingdom; Oxford University Press), 1992, 117.

ferocity and malignity which we have rarely seen equaled.”<sup>43</sup> The *Dispatch* also warns its readers that the Know Nothings will “gladly enlist under the British flag” if the Irish launched a rumored invasion of British Canada, so that they could “exterminate the wretches who, but for the protection of the laws, they would annihilate now, being convinced that their destruction would prove the triumph of the Protestant faith.”<sup>44</sup> For context, during the Irish resistance movements of the 1800s in opposition to British rule, there were occasionally propositions for Irish emigrants in the United States to invade Canada and essentially hold the territory hostage in exchange for Irish independence. Such a plan was unsuccessfully carried out by the Fenian Brotherhood in the 1860s, but it was unsuccessful and totally overshadowed by the American Civil War. The article already demonstrated that it is serving as a response to attacks on the Irish in New York, and that the Know-Nothings’ hatred of the Irish was so strong that they would join a foreign military to get the chance to violently defend the global Anglo identity.

The pro-Irish article is also revealing of anti-Irish stereotypes, which are discernable from the positive qualities that the newspaper attributes to Irish and Irish Americans. It traced Irish participation in American victories from the Revolution to the Mexican American War, reliable laborers who made it possible to lay the nation’s railroad tracks, loyal adherents to the Constitution (meaning, in context, they did not support abolition), and as “pioneers in that mighty march of peaceful enterprise, which has accomplished more for this country than all the victories of war.”<sup>45</sup> With these descriptions, the article combats Know-Nothing attacks on the Irish character, and tries to reverse the stereotypical image of Irish as politically undermining,

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<sup>43</sup> "War Upon The Irish," *The Daily Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), April 3, 1854, Page 2, Image 2, col. 1.

<sup>44</sup> "War Upon The Irish," *The Daily Dispatch*, April 3, 1854.

<sup>45</sup> "War Upon The Irish," *The Daily Dispatch*, April 3, 1854.

lazy, unindustrious, and unpatriotic. The article ends by again warning that northern Know-Nothings wish to “exterminate” the New York Irish on the basis of their Catholicism, a rebuke of the religious tolerance that was part of the foundation of the United States, and by warning that the plans of the Know Nothings include torture, rebellion, and a vision of the United States that would return society to “the dark ages.”

Despite the presence of Irish settlers throughout American history, dating back to the colonial age, they remained a minority group that faced cruel discrimination until the 1900s. Major strides to becoming accepted by Anglo-Americans included valiant efforts in the Civil War, in the ranks of both the Union and the Confederacy, the laying of the transcontinental railroad, and occupying government positions and being civil servants and administrators. While these moments are the more well-known aspects of the Irish journey to being part of the American majority, another absolutely essential way that the Irish earned a place in Anglo society is through successful participation in mainstream culture and entertainment.

While some Irish immigrants became police officers, firemen, or local government administrators, scores more of these immigrants worked in low-paying, low-prestige jobs. It was from this group of poor Irish Catholic workers that the greatest champions of bareknuckle boxing emerged. The wealthiest, most successful, and most famous American pugilists from 1850 to 1910 were Irish immigrants or of Irish descent, and it is no coincidence that by the end of the Irish dominance of prizefighting, they were considered white members of American majority culture. Additionally, the Irish began a tradition that lasts until present day: the greatest of professional boxers coming from backgrounds of poverty and ethnic minority status, who use the sport to elevate themselves socially and financially.

Boxing in the context of the 1840s operated without any sort of governing board, company, or institution, but nearly all matches were fought according to the Broughton rules, unless the fighters both agreed to different terms. English boxing champion Jack Broughton developed the Broughton rules between 1741 and 1743. In 1741, Broughton had accidentally killed an opponent in the ring, and by the time he was English champion in 1743, his fame and status allowed him to publish a set of rules to better protect competitors and create fairer fights, so that in-ring tragedies were less likely.<sup>46</sup> Under the Broughton rules, which were enforced only by honor except during a championship match monitored by an official, fighters had to adhere to practices that included toeing the line, no strikes below the waist, no grabbing the opponent by the hair or clothes, that the winner receive two-thirds of the prize money, and no striking an opponent while he was down.<sup>47</sup> However, regional differences to the rules did occur, and in most of the English-speaking world, grappling, biting, eye-gouging, and head-butting were typically considered legal moves until after the mid-1800s.

By 1843, the rules that were typically adhered to were the London Prize Ring Rules, which underwent modifications in the later decades to eventually outlaw gouging, biting, holding the ropes, and kicking. After the London Prize Ring Rules, the Marquis of Queensberry, John Sholto Douglas, published an updated set of rules in 1867. The Queensberry rules were less about safety and more about uniformity, such as standardizing the size of an official ring and determining how fighters chose corners.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, there was no limit to how many rounds

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<sup>46</sup> Jack Broughton, *Rules to be Observed in all Battles on the Stage*, (London, United Kingdom), 1743.

<sup>47</sup> “Toeing the line” refers to both fighters meeting in the center of the ring to begin each round. Fighters had thirty seconds to toe the line once they were called to do so. Being “down” meant that at least one knee was touching the ground, or a fighter collapsed completely.

<sup>48</sup> Gems, *Boxing: A Concise History of the Sweet Science*, 25.



were fought or how long the rounds were; such regulations came about later and were not universally enforced until the 1900s.

Due to the brutality of the sport, and the desperation of those who participated in it, it was not overly uncommon for matches to turn deadly, even under Broughton Rules. In 1842, the *New York Tribune* offered an insight into the tragedy of in-ring deaths. In early September of that year, there was a match between young pugilists Christopher Lilly, the son of English immigrants, and Thomas McCoy, the son of Irish immigrants. According to the report, McCoy arrived “sick, and was evidently in an inferior condition for such an affray....he was also too high on flesh, showing that he had not been carefully trained for such brutality.”<sup>49</sup> The paper described the crowds as unrefined and sinful people, “gamblers, brothelmasters, and keepers of flash grogeries,” who cheered for blood and pain and encouraged the men to fight on despite obvious warnings of life-threatening danger.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, the paper is an excellent example of nativist bias, as it falsely claimed that the “originators and fosterers” of boxing were “almost entirely foreigners,” and that boxing was not part of true American culture and not native to the country.<sup>51</sup> This sentiment is only true in the most literal sense that Western style boxing was not practiced by Native Americans, which is almost certainly not what the newspaper was trying to convey. Boxing existed among urban, rural, northern, Appalachian, and southern parts of the United States since the colonial period.

The Lilly-McCoy fight turned deadly after nearly three hours of combat. The paper described the tragic results in vivid detail:

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<sup>49</sup> Horace Greeley, “The Slaughter of McCoy,” *New York Tribune*, September 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup>, 1842.

<sup>50</sup> Greeley, “The Slaughter of McCoy.”

<sup>51</sup> Greeley, “The Slaughter of McCoy.”

“At the one hundred and twentieth round, McCoy stood up as erect as ever, but with his eyes closed in funeral black, his nose destroyed, his face gone, and clots of blood chocking the throat which had no longer the power to eject them. He could barely walk, but still sparred with some spirit, though unable to get in a blow at his still vigorous antagonist...McCoy had been thrown or knocked down eighty-one times, his opponent falling heavily as possible upon him. For the last time this was repeated; and, when Lilly was lifted off, McCoy was found lifeless, and sank inanimate in his second’s arms.”<sup>52</sup>

Upon the end of the fight, an event official declared “Come, carry off your dead, and produce your next man!”<sup>53</sup> Thomas McCoy, impoverished son of Irish immigrants, in the face of discrimination, nativism, and desperation, fought for his honor and manhood until his final breath in front of a hostile Anglo-American crowd and opponent. He died at twenty years of age in 1842, and his bloody corpse was dragged from the contest stage to the ground. Horace Greely, the writer for *The New York Tribune*, titled his article “The Slaughter of McCoy.”

These were the brutal conditions under which Irish men risked their lives in efforts to make a career of glory, heroism, and wealth. It was the desperation of the Irish that drove them to commit to such perils, and in the 1800s it was indeed mostly the Irish that fought for a living. Between 1840 and 1860, 71.9% of all professional prizefighters were Irish or Irish-American, with major American boxing centers located in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and New Orleans.<sup>54</sup> In addition to the Irish making up a large quantity of boxers, they also made up the highest quality of boxers. Until the 1920s, Irish pugilists held nine of the nineteen possible recognized championships, and Irish boxers became some of the first American athletes to become national celebrities.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Greely, “The Slaughter of McCoy.”

<sup>53</sup> Greely, “The Slaughter of McCoy.”

<sup>54</sup> Gems, *Boxing: A Concise History of the Sweet Science*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Gems, *Boxing: A Concise History of the Sweet Science*, 139.

Hundreds of Irish-American fighters spent the mid-to-late-1800s battling each other on stage for boxing supremacy, but a few of these boxers stand out as true representatives of the larger trends within Irish boxing. Their lives and careers transform statistics into people, with recognizable names, distinct styles, and different contributions to the sport. Some of the early boxing greats included “Yankee” Sullivan, Bob Fitzsimmons, and James J. Corbett, also known as “Gentleman Jim.” Each man had an upbringing that paralleled the many themes of Irish immigration and Irish boxing, and their stories are direct insights into these trends.

Yankee Sullivan was born in Ireland in 1811 with the name James Ambrose, but like many fighters who sought to reshape their identity he was known in his lifetime almost exclusively by his nickname. Like millions of other Irish citizens, he emigrated from his homeland to escape increasing poverty and decreasing opportunities, and settled in the United States. Upon arrival to the United States, he was soon recognized as a proficient wrestler but transitioned to boxing, where there was more money and mobility available. In 1849, he fought a man named Tom Hyer in the epitome of the nativist-versus-immigrants tension.<sup>56</sup> Hyer was a staunch nativist and member of the vicious “Native Americans” gang based in New York, and was personally backed by infamous gang leader William Poole, also known as “Bill the Butcher.” Poole himself was a talented boxer and charismatic public figure, whose hatred of the Irish, Catholicism, abolitionists, and immigrants made him the embodiment of the nativist movement. At this point, Tom Hyer was the recognized American heavyweight champion, a title that was only official via public opinion, as the sport was still illegal. Sullivan, backed by Irish gangs, challenged the title with the aim of becoming the first immigrant to hold the American championship. After evading police in Baltimore, the two sides were able to find a

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<sup>56</sup> Gems, *Boxing: A Concise History of the Sweet Science*, 20.

secure location to hold the fight: a flotilla off the coast of Maryland, unreachable by police. The fight lasted just over seventeen minutes. Hyer tied up Sullivan in the fifteenth round and seemingly either broke or dislocated the Irishman's arm, causing Sullivan to admit defeat in the following round.<sup>57</sup> Hyer retained the title and the nativist sympathizers claimed the championship as symbolic of their supremacy, and violence between gangs quickly ensued.

Despite this defeat, Sullivan had an illustrious career and inherited Hyer's title when the American retired two years later in 1851, to the fury of nativists. He defended the title successfully for another two years. Sullivan retired a few years later and moved to California where he worked for Democrats as a "strong man" who protected ballot boxes and likely tampered with local election results through intimidation. He was murdered in jail in 1856, most likely by Democrat hit men who were worried he would confess to extensive voter fraud on the party's behalf, though his death was falsely reported as a suicide.<sup>58</sup> *The New York Times* attributed his "suicide" to "that affair in San Francisco," which "worked upon Sullivan's mind to the extent that he ended his own existence in prison...found dead upon his bed."<sup>59</sup> The San Francisco affair that the paper referred to was Sullivan's involvement in voter fraud schemes and ballot-box stuffing. Sullivan's legacy is remarkably symbolic of the Irish struggles of his time period: he emigrated from Ireland to escape encroaching poverty and famine, became a successful pugilist, quite literally fought off violent nativist sentiment, and was an active agent

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<sup>57</sup> To "tie up" an opponent is to hold them in a clinch and limit their control over their arms so that they are vulnerable and off balance. In modern boxing, tie ups are heavily monitored by the referee and many forms of them are illegal.

<sup>58</sup> "Yankee Sullivan No More," *The New York Times*, June 30, 1856.

<sup>59</sup> "Yankee Sullivan No More," *The New York Times*, June 30, 1856.

for the Democratic Party until a combination of both commitment to the party and desperation for work forced him to make illicit decision, costing him his life.

Decades later, Bob Fitzsimmons was the heavyweight fighter in firm control of his division. He was famous in the sporting world by the time of his death, and his life was yet another reflection of the Irish experience. His father was an Irish soldier, and he was born in England in 1863 but raised in New Zealand amongst the Irish communities there. Despite not residing in Ireland, his parents and his community instilled in him a deep sense of Irishness that inspired his fighting career. Fitzsimmons was known for his toughness and underdog persona in both his fighting style and personality. He spent the most successful part of his career as a heavyweight, though he stood at a slightly below average five feet and eleven inches, and weighed at most around 170 pounds.

Aside from his heavyweight success, he also held championships in two other divisions during his career, making him the first ever fighter in the world to hold titles in three weight divisions. This status made him legendary in boxing social circles, and kept boxing greatness firmly under Irish control. He made it a habit to fight larger, more naturally muscular opponents and defeat them with speed, quick snapping punches, and ring intelligence. In a book he wrote about self-defense and the science behind successful martial arts, he attributed his success to these qualities in addition to extensive training, an understanding of anatomy and muscle structure, and immeasurable traits like courage and determination.<sup>60</sup> He won the middleweight championship in 1891 and had an impressive reign, not losing the title until 1902, where he was defeated by Irish-American Jim Jeffries. He won the heavyweight title in 1896, and the light

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<sup>60</sup> Robert Fitzsimmons, *Physical Culture and Self Defense*, (Philadelphia, PA: Drexel Biddle Publishing), 1901.

heavyweight title in 1903. When he eventually lost the titles, it was to Irishmen. He fought until 1915, retired, and died of pneumonia two years later in 1917.<sup>61</sup> The responses to his death show the comradery and respect that these modern gladiators had for each other, despite their rivalries, as both Jim Jeffries, “the man who took the heavyweight crown away from Fitzsimmons,” and Tom Sharkey, another of his long-time rivals, publicized their condolences.<sup>62</sup> While difficult to verify, he fought approximately 350 professional matches.

A contemporary of Fitzsimmons, “Gentleman Jim” Corbett was born in 1866, whose parents were middle-class Irish immigrants who raised him to be competitive, driven, and honorable. He spent his early boxing years honing his skills at the San Francisco Olympic Club and working a day job as a bank teller, which was part of his life that attributed to his nickname. Aside from his relatively comfortable job at a bank, he earned the title “Gentleman” through his boxing style as well as his lifestyle.

A true student of the “science of self-defense,” Corbett provided audiences with a different experience than the slugging brutality of typical prizefights. He was calculating, professional, and intelligent, in addition to the more common fighting traits like being strong, fast, durable, and athletic. Unlike blacksmiths and farmhands who took up fighting without formal training and relied on the physique that their occupation developed for them, Corbett trained under some of the finest American coaches, studied instructional pamphlets, and sparred with purpose. He, along with later heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, ushered in a new era of prizefighting that proved that technique could be far more dangerous than strength.

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<sup>61</sup> “Death of ‘Lanky Bob’ Shocks LA Friends, *Los Angeles Herald*, October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1917.

<sup>62</sup> “Death of ‘Lanky Bob’ Shocks LA Friends, *Los Angeles Herald*, October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1917.

These efforts have led to modern historians titling Corbett as the ‘Father of Modern Boxing,’ as he set the standard for technical-based fighting for decades after his retirement. Additionally, he drew new audience demographics by adding a level of respectability to the sport. He was known for his handsome face, toned body, and polite manners, which brought women to his corner more than any other fighter of his era, and in addition to fighting he was a theater actor who travelled the country to put on plays.<sup>63</sup> His mannerisms did not take away from his ability, because in 1892 he won the heavyweight title and defended it impressively for five years until he was defeated by Bob Fitzsimmons himself. Corbett’s last professional fight was in 1903 when he challenged the heavyweight champion at the time, but he lost after ten rounds. Newspaper coverage of the event described the defending champion taking punches gladly and baiting Corbett into making mistakes, with Corbett’s only successful round being the eighth. Despite having the crowd on his side, Gentleman Jim was outclassed through no fault other than his aging body, and the loss reinforced his decision to retire.<sup>64</sup> He later retired from fighting to act and spent the rest of his life at the same address in Queens, on Corbett Street. He put on his last sparring lesson at age 60 in 1924 and died a true legend in 1933.

Finally, an analysis of Irish boxing history could not be complete without the addition of the pugilistic legend John L. Sullivan: heavyweight champion, the first ever American sports celebrity, the first athlete to earn over a million dollars, and personal friend and sparring partner to President Theodore Roosevelt. Sullivan exemplified the final era of bareknuckle brawlers before the age of scientific, technical boxing. He was self-taught, had a crass lexicon, relied on unrelenting brute strength, and is even the subject of an internet meme entitled “Manly Man.”

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<sup>63</sup> Gems, *Boxing: A Concise History of the Sweet Science*, 140.

<sup>64</sup> “Jefferies Was No Gentleman,” *The New York Times*, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1903.

His quotes range from inspirational thoughts on honor and masculinity, to his far more famous “I can lick any son of a bitch in the house!” Ultimately, John L. Sullivan was not the greatest boxer who ever lived, but was certainly the most important.

Sullivan was born in 1858 in Boston, the son of working-class Irish immigrant parents. His early working career was testament to his restless nature and need for challenges and adventures: he was a plumber for six months, an on-and-off paid baseball player, a tinsmith for eighteen months, worked occasional odd jobs as a repair man or laborer, and even, to the shame of his father, a musician. He left each job after getting into a physical altercation with a disagreeable coworker or superior, and eventually transitioned to boxing as an occupation at age nineteen.<sup>65</sup> Unlike trained men like Gentleman Jim Corbett, Sullivan began boxing almost accidentally. While working as a tinsmith, he was called out of the crowd while watching an exhibition. He had never boxed before, but knew how to fight from sheer experience growing up, and according to his own memory he faced his opponent and “punched him as hard as I could, knocking him clear over a piano that was on the stage.”<sup>66</sup> From then on, Sullivan was captivated by the response he could get from a crowd and recognized the natural talents that his frame gave him. In prime fighting condition he was 200 pounds and a few inches over six feet tall, and attributed his strength to his mother’s side of a family, as apparently she was known for her strength and size in her hometown in Ireland. Sullivan was probably the last great champion to come out of this line of fighters; working men who used their natural size to their advantage and learned from trial and error.

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<sup>65</sup> John L. Sullivan, *Reminiscences of at 19<sup>th</sup> Century Gladiator*, (Boston, MA), 1892, 14.

<sup>66</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of at 19<sup>th</sup> Century Gladiator*, 14.



Sullivan demolished his opponents with ease in his early fights, and was the heavyweight champion by 1882, a title which he defended for a staggering ten years, before losing it to Corbett in 1892, the same year he published his autobiography. His title win was over Irishman Paddy Ryan, at an outdoor venue in New Orleans, where they fought in temperatures over 100 degrees Fahrenheit for eleven minutes. To display no ethnic divisions or animosity, Sullivan's colors reflected his Irish background. He wrote that "my colors on this occasion consisted of a white silk handkerchief with a green border; in the left-hand upper corner was the American flag, in the right-hand upper corner the Irish flag, in the lower left-hand corner the American flag, and the lower right-hand corner the Irish flag."<sup>67</sup> Sullivan was a proud American, but made it a point to put his Irish heritage on display. The significance here is that by the late 1800s, Irish-Americans had largely broken through the social barriers that had been holding them back throughout the century, and were part of mainstream white American culture. Sullivan's immense popularity among each social class in the United States, despite his frequent display of ethnic pride, is a display of the end of the transitionary period of the Irish from non-white to white.

However, it was not Sullivan's fighting style but his personality that won over crowds and earned him more money than any athlete prior. Sullivan was the white working man's hero. He had background as a tradesman, grew up lower-middle class, took care of his friends, and, important to white America, was one of the many great fighters who drew the "color line," and would not give fighters of color a chance at the title. He was also a viciously vocal opponent of Jack Johnson, and was outspoken about how disgraceful he thought it was to let a black man be

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<sup>67</sup> Sullivan, *Reminiscences of at 19<sup>th</sup> Century Gladiator*, 46.

the world heavyweight champion. These traits earned him the love, respect, admiration, and even jealousy of American men throughout his career.

Sullivan was also an incredibly successful self-promoter. A heavy drinker, Sullivan would travel across the country visiting taverns and bars, announcing his arrival with his famous “I can lick any son of a bitch in the house.”<sup>68</sup> He would challenge locals to drinking contests, boxing matches, arm wrestling tournaments, and card games, and after defeating the local men in most endeavors, he would buy drinks for the entire room to ensure leaving on a positive note. These tours earned him a devoted following and guaranteed his name recognition wherever he fought, amassing unprecedented crowd sizes. Common folk legends claim that there was not a saloon in the United States that did not have Sullivan’s portrait on the wall, and that he had never lost a fight in his life. His status earned him the company of famous men from all fields, including Theodore Roosevelt and author Jack London. Of Sullivan, Roosevelt wrote: “Old John L has been a greater power for good in this country than many a highly respectable person who would scorn to meet him on terms of equality.”<sup>69</sup> Sullivan was probably among the top ten most recognizable men in the country during his career and was certainly the most famous person of Irish descent at the time. John L. Sullivan died in 1918 at age sixty, from a lifetime of heavy drinking, eating, fighting, traveling, campaigning for boxing legalization, and overall exhaustion. His fame allowed him to successfully petition the government to legalize prizefighting under the Queensberry rules, in addition to the mandatory use of boxing gloves. Without the success, fame, and influence of Sullivan, the sport very well may have remained illegal for decades longer.

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<sup>68</sup> This personal mantra was also what Sullivan titled another of his autobiographies.

<sup>69</sup>Theodore Roosevelt, as quoted in John J. Leary, *Talks With TR*, (Houghton Mifflin Company), 1920.

The complex story of the Irish in America is not a new scholarly topic. Social history, political history, folk history, and even military history have had scholars analyze themes of Irish immigration, discrimination, and eventual success in the United States. However, a lacking piece of scholarship is the participation of Irish in mainstream culture and entertainment in the United States. While faced with racism, poverty, negative stereotyping, nativism, and doubts of their masculinity, thousands of marginalized Irish men took to the dangerous sport of prizefighting to earn money, assert their masculinity, find a sense of belonging, and ultimately become an accepted group within white Anglo-American culture by risking their very lives in the ring. Of those thousands of men, hundreds became successful, dozens became legends, and a few became national heroes. It was this example set by the Irish that led future marginalized groups to follow the same path. After the end of the Irish reign, boxing was dominated by Jews and Italians, followed by African Americans, and then by Hispanics. In modern professional boxing, nearly all professional fighters are black or Hispanic, with a rising minority of Slavs, due to the increase interest of the Russian government in their amateur boxing program. Boxing is patterned and predictable, a cycle of aging champions being replaced by hungry new contenders, with equally predictable demographics of participation, but that does not limit its entertainment or social importance. As long as there are young men in the United States searching for belonging, discipline, competition, and honor, boxing will have a place in American society.

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